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AUTHOR Benedict, Marjorie A.
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ABSTRACT

This essay outlines general criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of an existing or proposed sign system for libraries with respect to the needs of physically disabled library users, specifically the deaf, the blind, and those confined to wheelchairs. The function of the International Symbol of Access is described, and design considerations relating to the clarity and conspicuity of sign systems are summarized. Relevant standards for the evaluation of library sign systems are mentioned. An instrument for the evaluation of library sign systems for the disabled, reproduced from a publication of the State University of New York Construction Fund, is included with the text, as are illustrations of the International Symbol of Access, the Helvetica semi-bold typeface (especially legible, and thus appropriate for use on signs), signs for room identification, and signs indicating the location of elevators capable of accommodating wheelchairs. (Author/JL)

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LIBRARY SIGNS AND THE DISABLED

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When a sign system for a library is being planned, evaluated, or improved, an important component must not be overlooked: the needs of physically disabled patrons. The necessity for new approaches to library signs for the disabled often becomes apparent when a library begins to make plans for compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, federal legislation requiring equal access for disabled persons.

An ideal library sign system provides necessary information for its users effectively and efficiently. To be effective, the signs must provide direction, identification, and warnings, both clearly and conspicuously. To be efficient, the number of signs and the amount of text on each sign should be held to the minimum needed for clarity. In addition, there are considerations, such as esthetics and consistency, that enhance the effectiveness of the signs used.

General Criteria

The International Symbol of Access (figure 1) is used to indicate all handicapped access. By international agreement, all graphics using this symbol should have a white figure on a black or dark blue background and should measure six inches by six inches whenever possible. This symbol and other signs and symbols may be enlarged proportionally where necessary.

Consistency contributes much to the success of a sign system. The signs themselves, as well as lettering and symbols used on the signs, should show consistency with respect to size, shape, color, style, and

placement. Signs for the disabled should be in harmony with the overall library sign system. As for placement of signs, they ought to stand out among other competing visual or tactile stimuli. Proper lighting should be provided and materials of which signs are made should be free of glare. One should be certain that signs themselves are not hazardous. An example of a potentially dangerous sign might be a movable sign on a standard that could be misplaced, thereby becoming an unexpected obstacle to a blind person.

For patrons with moderate to severe visual impairments the most important sign characteristics are large letters or figures and high contrast. The guidelines for New York's academic libraries recommend Helvetica semi-bold lettering (figure 2) and black and white combinations. For optimum results, signs must be placed in conspicuous and strategic locations. Signs for blind patrons can include appropriate tactile signs (usually braille) in vital locations, audible signals in elevators, and changes in floor surface textures to indicate locations of service points or potential dangers, such as stairwell openings.[1] It is important that the tactile signs be of adequate size.

In general, hearing impaired persons do not require additional signs for identification or directional purposes. When it comes to warning signs, however, provision for the special needs of deaf library users must be made. One example is the fire alarm, normally an audible signal. Alternate means of notifying the deaf of dangers such as fire should be available; the most common method used is a system of flashing lights.

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of a Library Sign System

When a proposed or existing system of library signs is to be evaluated, it is best to obtain a set of accepted standards that are appropriate for the library. The standards used here are those of the New York State University Construction Fund and can be found in its manual, Architectural Accessibility for the Disabled of College Campuses.[2] If other state or local requirements are applicable, the planners should get a copy of its counterpart. These standards are to be considered as a framework to which one ought to add whatever additional visual, audible, or tactile signs are needed for the given library's disabled users.

The first step in the process of assessing how well a library's sign system complies with accepted criteria is to study the requirements outlined in the appropriate set of standards and to summarize them in writing. From that summary one can prepare an assessment instrument, such as the one given in the appendix of this article, on which to record the necessary information. The assessment instrument shown here is compressed; much more space is needed on a functional instrument to record the specific and detailed findings. Gathering the information is best accomplished by touring the library building to examine the signage for compliance with the criteria. It is strongly recommended that a disabled person be part of the assessment team to represent the users' perspective.

This sample instrument starts with universal criteria for graphic symbols and signs, including the International Symbol of Access, standards for lettering and directional arrows, and standards for mounting signs on doors and walls. If lettering or a directional arrow is needed to

supplement the International Symbol, it should be on a separate sign mounted above or beside the International Symbol. Signs on walls or doors should be mounted five feet above the level of the floor with special screws and especially strong adhesive to help prevent vandalism. The State University of New York guidelines recommend as being most tamper resistant, Clutch-Slot, Socket-Head, Phillips Head, and Hexagon screws.

The next section of the assessment instrument deals with criteria for identification of rooms, facilities, and equipment designated for public use. The guidelines of the State University Construction Fund of New York show one set of criteria for restrooms and a slightly different set for all other rooms and spaces. These standards specify sizes, colors, and placement of signs, including proper display of the International Symbol of Access, as well as height of letters, color contrast, and tactile qualities for each type of sign. Figures 3 and 4 show examples of such signs.

Safe and accessible routing for persons confined to wheelchairs or for other persons with serious mobility problems must be indicated. Doorways having adequate width for passage of a wheelchair and the locations of elevators should be marked with appropriate signs. The International Symbol of Access and additional signs with directional arrows or words mounted below or adjacent to the symbol should be placed in strategic and conspicuous locations. The State University Construction Fund guidelines strongly suggest that one brightly-colored background be chosen for the supplementary signs bearing letters or directional arrows for each routing. They further

suggest using green or orange and avoiding red to prevent handicapping protanomalous observers (persons with defective color perception). Examples of signs used for routing directions can be seen in figures 5, 6, and 7.

According to the standards adopted for use in New York's academic libraries, the minimum height of lettering is normally two inches. In the case of signs giving directions for use of equipment, slight variations are permitted, if unavoidable. High contrast is necessary for the partially sighted and tactile characteristics are a helpful supplement to visual signs. Tactile specifications given in the appendix, Section II, D are minimum standards. The use of tactile letters under one inch high, though permitted in exceptional cases, is discouraged as a general practice.

The above criteria represent a basic evaluation only. Other considerations based on the needs of each individual library's clientele should be incorporated into the evaluation instrument. When it comes to determining what should be included among these considerations, library planners will find that disabled users and campus rehabilitation counselors can provide invaluable assistance.

Most disabled persons appreciate anything that helps to facilitate their independence. A library sign system that takes their needs into account can make a difference.

References

1. Pollet, Dorothy and Peter C. Haskell, Editors, Sign Systems for Libraries (New York: Bowker, 1979), p. 110.

2. Cotler, Stephen R. and Alfred H. DeGraff, Architectural Accessibility for the Disabled of College Campuses (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York/State University Construction Fund, 1976).

Appendix: An Instrument for Evaluation of a Library Sign System for the Disabled

The standards used for this assessment instrument are those of the State University Construction Fund taken from its publication, Architectural Accessibility for the Disabled of College Campuses by Stephen R. Cotler and Alfred H. DeGraff. (Albany, N.Y.: State University Construction Fund, 1976.)

	DOES LIBRARY CONFORM?		
	YES	NO*	PARTIALLY*
I. Universal criteria for graphic symbols and signs			
A. International Symbol of Access			
1. Minimum size: 6 in. x 6 in.			
2. Dark blue or black background with white figure.			
3. Placed in all required locations**			
B. Lettering and directional arrows			
1. Placed on separate sign(s) from the one used for International Symbol of Access.			
2. Lettering is Helvetica Semi-Bold.			
C. Standards for door and wall mounted signs			
1. Bottom of sign is 5 ft. from floor level.			
2. Sign is installed with specially designed screws plus an especially strong adhesive.			
II. Criteria for rooms, facilities, and equipment			
A. Standards for restroom identification			
1. Lettering on entrance doors conforms to standards for facility identification for the partially sighted: 2 in. letters, 5 ft. ht., centered on door, white on black or black on white.			

* Keep a record of locations and details of nonconformity or partial conformity.

** Entrances, exits, routing, accessible facilities (such as restrooms, drinking fountains, and telephones), and other locations as appropriate.

Appendix

	DOES LIBRARY CONFORM?		
	YES	NO	PARTIALLY

2. Entrance doors of restrooms accessible for wheelchair use bear an International Symbol of Access above the lettering.
3. Inside the restroom another International Symbol of Access without lettering is placed on the door of each accessibly designed stall at a centered height of 4 ft.

B. All rooms and spaces for public use except restrooms have identification signage that conforms to the following criteria:
   1. Signs are wall-mounted.
   2. Signs are placed adjacent to the opening edge of the door.
   3. Bottom of sign is 5 ft. from floor level.
   4. Facility identification signs conform to standards for the partially sighted:
      a. Minimum height of letters is 2 in.
      b. Signs have white letters on black background or black letters on white background, whichever is most appropriate for the lighting and wall color in the specific location.
   5. Minimum standard if space is limited and room identification is lengthy: at the very least the room number conforms to II.B.1-4 above.

C. Routing directions for patrons with mobility disabilities.
   1. Signage consists of:
      a. International Symbol of Access with white figure on black or dark blue background, minimum size is 6 in. x 6 in.
      b. Additional directional arrow or lettered sign is used where necessary. One brightly-colored background (green or orange suggested) may be used for background on signs bearing lettering and directional arrows of each routing.
      c. Minimum height for lettering and arrows is 2 in.

Appendix

DOES LIBRARY CONFORM?

YES NO PARTIALLY

2. Placement of signs.
   a. Signs are placed in strategic and conspicuous locations.
   b. Supplementary signs with lettering or arrows are placed below or adjacent to the International Symbol of Access at each location.
   c. The bottom of the sign is 5 ft. above floor level.

D. Signage for equipment use if letters smaller than 2 in. high are necessary
   1. In no case is lettering less than ½ in. high.
   2. All letters are upper case.
   3. Letters between 1 in. and 2 in. are either raised or engraved.
   4. Letters between ½ in. and 1 in. are raised.
   5. Signs are white on black or black on white.

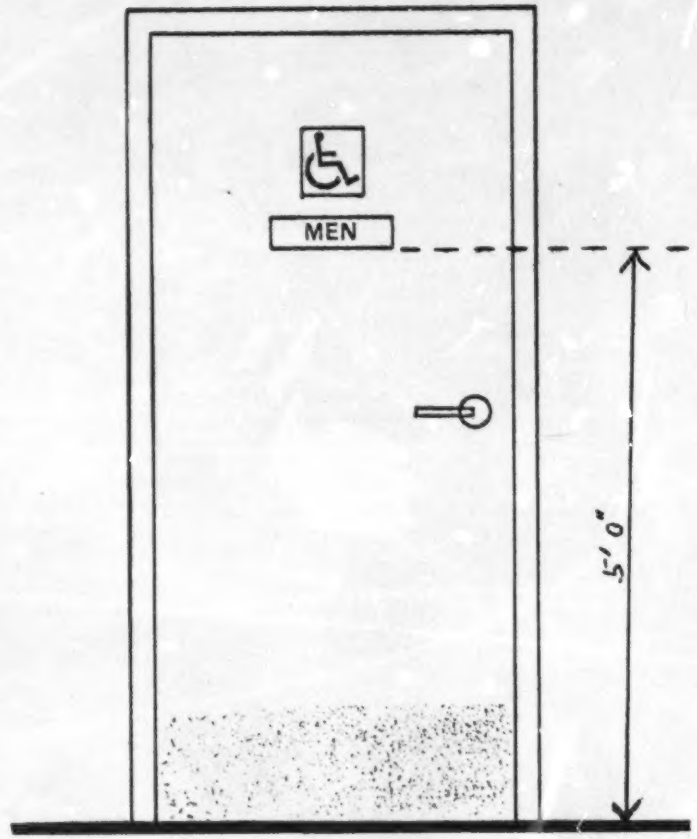
E. Other considerations.

Figure 1

INTERNATIONAL SYMBOL OF ACCESS

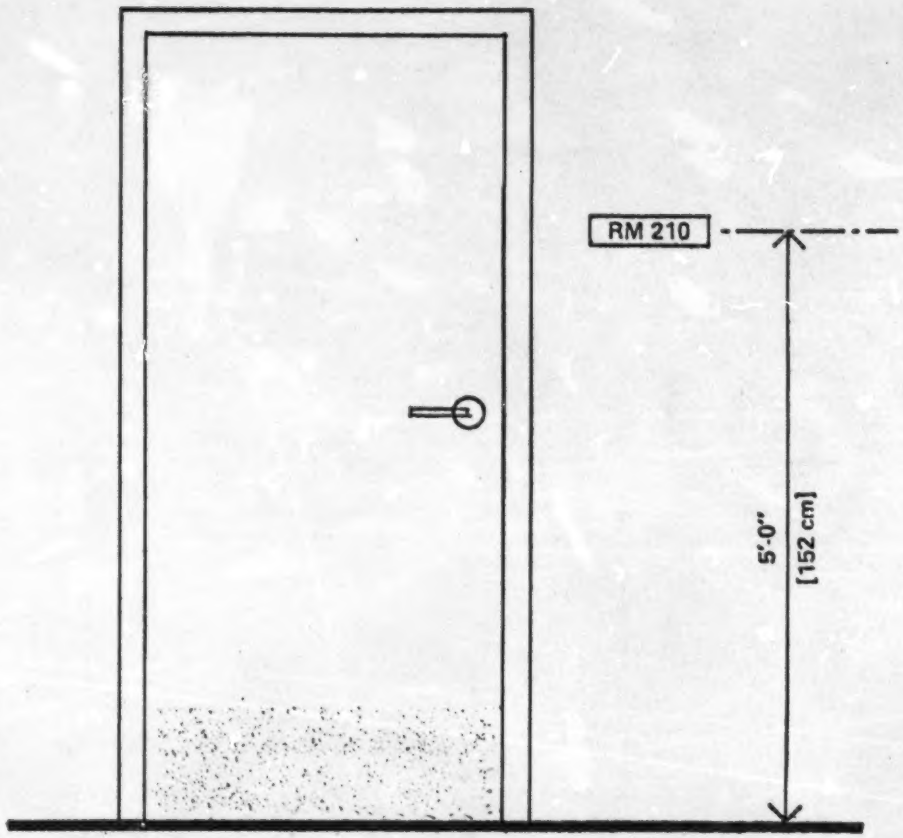
Figure 2

Figure 3



SIGNAGE FOR RESTROOM IDENTIFICATION

Figure 4



SIGNAGE FOR ROOM IDENTIFICATION

Figure 5

Figure 6

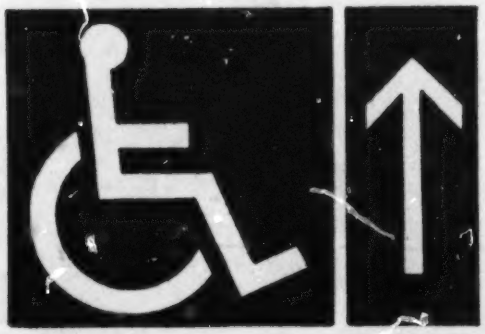


Figure 7

ELEVATOR FOR HANDICAPPED